

GREENWorks

Ideas for a Cleaner Environment

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Is “Compostable Plastic” an Oxymoron?

Have you ever gotten take-out food in one of those containers that look like conventional plastics, but are labeled “compostable or biodegradable”? What did you do with it when you were finished? Have you ever try to compost one in your backyard compost pile?

Home compost does not reach and maintain temperatures necessary to break down these containers. Most people probably just throw it in the trash or attempt to recycle it. When you throw this kind of container in the trash, it is usually incinerated or ends up in a landfill; this means it is either buried or burned. If it is burned, it turns to ash. If it is buried in a landfill, it does not break down or biodegrade—landfills are specifically designed so that nothing biodegrades inside them. Recycling may not be an option for most “bioplastics” either. Depending on their make-up, they may actually contaminate the recycling process.

In order for compostable plastics to decompose, they must be sent to a commercial composting facility. Currently New Hampshire has very few commercial facilities capable of composting this type of plastic. Most of them do not accept food container waste from individuals. These issues make it impossible for individuals to compost plastic in New Hampshire.

As well-meaning businesses work to “green” their establishments, many are turning to these new products. They may think that buying biodegradable or compostable plastic is a good thing for the environment. It is important that the correct information gets out to people making these purchasing choices.

There are things we can all do to be conscious consumers. Order only what you will eat or bring your own container from home. Ask your favorite restaurant to carry a more sustainable take-out or take-home container, such as 100 percent recycled paperboard or an easily recycled container. Some restaurants use such durable plastic take-out containers that they can be reused at home as leftover containers for years and eliminate the need for you to buy plastic storage containers. And as a bonus, when they are no longer useable, they can be recycled.

Corporations, businesses and restaurants recognize the fact that Americans are actively searching out “green” products. They put a lot of marketing dollars into promoting green practices. Let’s help to get the true information out there about what is really good for the environment, including dispelling the myth about compostable plastic use.

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